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Citizens Urge the Legislature to Keep Clean Elections Strong

Bipartisan group of advocates gather in the State House to deliver more than 5,000 petition signatures to lawmakers

(AUGUSTA, ME) Advocates of Maine's Clean Election law gathered in Augusta today as the Maine Senate prepares to vote on amendments to the Maine Clean Election Act. Advocates urged the legislature to keep Clean Elections strong, and they presented more than 5,000 recently collected petition signatures from Maine people urging the same.

Voters overwhelmingly approved the Maine Clean Election Act at the ballot in 1996 so that community-supported candidates could compete against wealthy opponents and those with close ties to special interests. A key part of the law was the matching funds provision that was struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court last summer. Whether, and how, to replace the matching funds system is the subject of debate on LD 1774.

As drafted, LD 1774, would do nothing to replace the matching funds provision; it merely eliminates all references to matching funds from the statute. LD 1774 came out of the Veterans and Legal Affairs Committee with a divided report, and Senator John Patrick intends to run the minority report as an amendment to replace the bill. The minority report is the "requalifying option" that was recommended by the state's Ethics Commission and that is endorsed by Maine Citizens for Clean Elections and a diverse array of Maine people. Three additional "compromise" amendments have been proposed to LD 1774.

"When the court invalidated matching funds, the legislature had the responsibility to comply with the ruling in a way that respects the clear intention of voters. Maine voters have repeatedly asked their representatives to strengthen the law. It's disappointing that a majority on the Committee want to do nothing, which would weaken the law," said Andrew Bossie, Executive Director of MCCE. "Doing nothing will result in more influence for big money special interests, and that is the wrong direction for Maine."

Analysis by the nonpartisan Ethics Commission shows that the requalifying option could be implemented in 2012 without any additional cost to taxpayers. Adoption of this alternative would allow participating candidates to receive supplemental funding after they successfully complete one or two additional rounds of collecting Qualifying Contributions - the \$5 donations that local voters make to help a candidate qualify for public funding. Without access to additional resources candidates in competitive races may opt to privately finance their campaigns, and participating candidates will be more vulnerable to outside spending from special interests.

"This is a common sense, Maine-grown solution to the problem created by the court," said Bossie.

"Maine people worked hard to come up with a budget-neutral option that would retain the viability of Clean Elections, and we strongly encourage the legislature to vote for it. A diminished system will work fine for many incumbents, but Maine people want a robust system that works for all candidates."

In addition to Bossie, several speakers reinforced the Keep Clean Elections Strong message.

"Maine people have every right to expect leadership from their Legislature," said former Senator Ed Youngblood (R-Brewer), who is a candidate for the District 31 Senate seat currently held by Richard Rosen. "The do-nothing option is the opposite of leadership - it takes a good law and opens it up to more special interest influence. Maine's citizens deserve better."

Rep. Anne Haskell (D-Portland) who is a candidate for the District 9 Senate seat currently held by Joe Brannigan commented, "For ten years, Clean Elections has provided opportunity for Maine people to get involved in elections, run for office, win elections, and serve their communities. The Legislature must not fail to update the people's law after the court's damaging ruling."

Augusta voter Sarah Walton addressed the crowd, saying, "We couldn't stop the United States Supreme Court from making a bad decision, but here in Maine we can respond with the same sort of innovation and leadership that brought about Clean Elections in the first place, with bipartisan cooperation that has allowed us to keep it strong for more than a decade." Calling for passage of the requalifying option, Walton continued, "We don't need Maine to be more like Washington, DC. We need a strong Clean Election system that works for voters, not special interests."

MCCE is a nonpartisan nonprofit that works in the public interest to defend and strengthen Maine's campaign finance laws. MCCE works in coalition with a diverse group of organizations and individuals including the League of Women Voters, the League of Young Voters, Common Cause and Maine People's Alliance.

Of LD 1774, Ben Chin, the Political Engagement Director for Maine People's Alliance said, "Just a few months ago, Maine people voted overwhelmingly to support Maine's system of strong and open democracy. It's surprising and troubling that members of the Legislature would now be considering measures to dismantle Maine's system of clean elections, which would increase corporate influence and make it more difficult for ordinary Mainers to participate in their government."

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